**“Water Privatization” as a Social Problem: How is the Problem of “Water Privatization” Socially Constructed?**

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**Abstract**

We investigated water privatization as a social problem from the social constructionist perspective. Much research has been done on the economic and social effects of water privatization, but little has been done to explain why it emerged as a topic of interest beyond those directly affected. Using New York Times newspaper articles, we conducted content analysis looking for key terms that track the issues and players, and how rhetoric changed over time. Key findings indicate: water privatization became a social problem around 2000, rose in coverage to a peak in the early to mid 2000s, disappeared from the news articles by 2007, and then replaced by “utility privatization” that rose in coverage in the mid-2000s. While examining the data we found an overwhelming contrast in the amount of pro-privatization quotes and anti-privatization quotes. The pro-privatization quotes found were centered around the potential to profit from privatization and the need for a more efficient water delivery system. The anti-privatization quotes centered around the human rights violations surrounding private water. As the debates progressed, the opposition to privatization evolved into “public ownership.”

**Theory and Research Questions**

This project sought to investigate the social construction of water privatization as a social problem. Unlike many other topics, water privatization presents a unique opportunity to explore the nature of social problems because it is not a phenomenon that is easy to differentiate from other social issues. In this paper, we explore the ways in which the media and public discourse have constructed water privatization as a social problem. We argue that the media and public discourse have constructed water privatization as a social problem through a process of selective framing and repetition of certain narratives.

**Methods**

Content analysis of news articles was used to track the social reality of the problem in the wider society. Databases of news articles and books were searched for studies about water privatization, and the arguments for and against private ownership were collected. A database was then constructed from these arguments across almost 100 news articles using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The data was coded for types of media that made key word analysis possible. The various articles coded as to be tracked over time. Specific analysis was then done to see if any “critical events” shift the claims being made before those events compared to after those events.

**Results**

Books mentions of “water privatization,” mostly in academic books, spike in the 1990s, while overall news stories decline after 2000. Women as presented in the news.

**Repentation of Women and Children**

Women as presented in the news.

- **Women are almost always mentioned as victims of “water privatization” instead of leader and fighters.**

- Women as ignored in the news.

- **There was only one woman in our data that was mentioned as an active advocate against water privatization, but only after being portrayed as a victim.**

- **The people of this high Andean city were ecstatic when they won the "water war."**

**Discussion and Conclusions**

After cataloguing and analyzing almost one hundred news articles pertaining to global water privatization from the New York Times, the data began to suggest some interesting social and political factors affecting the social construction of water privatization. The issue of water privatization has been around for centuries, with the first reference in New York Times being in 1799 when Alexander Hamilton wrote an article contending that a privately owned system would better serve the public. References to privatizing water are sprinkled throughout the New York Times database, but when did it fall from an economic and governmental issue to one that thousands of social movement groups rally behind and give their lives over? The World Bank and the U.N. called water a human need but not a human right, clearing the door to more and more requirements and pressure from private corporations for water. Water conflicts due to social, political, and economic impacts are thus increasing. Africa is one of the many regions where its citizens are caught between twin realities of water scarcity and water pollution, and the poor in Africa are finding that they are unable to pay the skyrocketing costs of water and sanitation services. This is not the result of water privatization. Politicalization events have occurred in Bolivia, Argentina, the Philippines, and Egypt and Wales, among other places. In 2000 there was a drastic rise in articles references to Cochabamba and Bolivia, a decline in the following years and then another rise in 2005. From our analysis we know that years to be a pivotal moment as those mentioned in coverage of later conflicts in a variety of places. The “water war” in Bolivia specifically Cochabamba was the catalyst for a series of protests in response to the privatization of the city’s municipal water supply company Semapa. The wave of demonstrations and violence ensued for almost a year culminating in several wounded and many dead. However, Cochabamba was victorious and the national government reversed the agreement in 2006, explaining the rise in references for those two years. Bolivia is one of the few success stories regarding revolts against the privatization of water, but unfortunately it is just that, one of very few. Protests against the rise of privatized water in Argentina, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Chile, and many more failed to achieve their goals.

In 2000, not only did the references to protests and violations rise drastically, but rhetoric that evokes emotional responses such as references to suffering women and children, poverty, and war rose as well. Articles use examples such as “…with no way to pay the $450 hookup fee charged by the French-run waterworks, she washes her clothes and bathes her three children in frigid well water beside a fetid creek.” However, even though these references bring up the ground level and feature some of the effects of raising water prices, they also painted women primarily as the victims. News stories emphasized tragedy and victims to capture reader interest. Using such language paints women and children as merely props in the battle instead of soldiers in the field like their male counterparts.

Interestingly, from the articles collected there were very few mentions from a pro-privatization platform. The few that were mentioned spoke of lucrative markets, profit margins, and economic growth but neglected to discuss the millions of lives affected by rising water prices. That lack of concern for human impacts sparked outrage from grassroots groups and independent news sources that have continued the dialogue against water privatization even after “water privatization” disappeared from major news sources after 2006. Not coincidently, 2006 is the year that the U.N. Human Development Report concluded that “…the conviction that the private sector offers a "magic bullet" for unleashing the equity and efficiency needed to accelerate progress towards water for all has proven to be misplaced.” In 2010, the U.N. did declare water a right. Thus we conclude that rhetorical efforts to replace “water privatization” with “utility privatization” seek to effectively escape pressures arising from news reports focused on harm to the helpless (poor, women, children) and place the debate back into the realm of economic and not social debate. Such social criticism has been marginalized to leftleaning activist websites and news sources since 2006, showing that social media, being allowed to run unchecked, has thwarted the potential of social media. It has left such “magic” stories out of mainstream news sources.

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